

GEORGIAN-OSSETIAN RELATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF RUSSIAN OCCUPATION

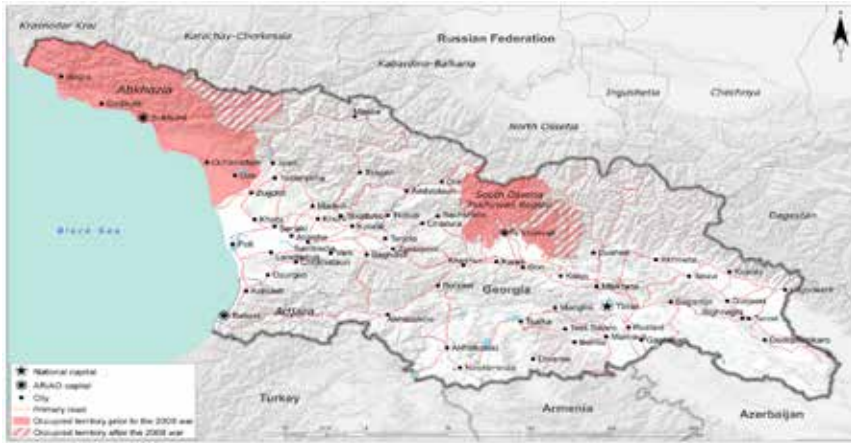
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We have been long dealing with the problem of Georgian-Ossetian relations, particularly, after the 2008 August war. In this paper, the issue will be considered in the context of Russia's creeping occupation,¹ which radically changed traditional intercultural ties between them. As is known, their relations have centuries old history; however, these relations were never homogeneous: in different periods, at different times, hostility and friendship alternated between them; in peacetime, close social, economic and cultural ties were established. In Eastern Georgia, especially during the Soviet era, Georgian-Ossetian couples made up the majority of ethnically mixed families. Therefore, this situation largely contributed to their linguistic and cultural unity and their integration.

In the 1990s, upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia entered a deep and multifaceted crisis. The country was not prepared to face difficult socio-economic transition processes and restoration of independence and struggled to handle domestic and foreign challenges of the new reality. In addition to the economic collapse, derangement of state institutions and political instability, the State also failed to maintain its territorial integrity and avoid ethnic conflicts.

Georgia's withdrawal from the USSR following the collapse of the communist state, inflicted a substantial blow on the geostrategic interests of Russia in the South Caucasus. Consequently, as an effective tool against the development and strengthening of independent Georgia, the

¹ This paper was written within the frames of the project Life in the Villages Affected by Russia's Creeping Occupation funded by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia (FR-18-10229).



Map 1. Georgian controlled territories before and after the 2008 war (compiled by Nika Loladze).

Kremlin authorities openly or covertly encouraged separatist movements and confrontations in Georgia's autonomous formations.

Historical issues became a powerful ideological factor fuelling separatist confrontations. In line with the political conjuncture, some scholars resorted to pseudoscientific revision of long-established provisions and factual material on Caucasian studies to defend their positions. The conceptual approaches of the apologists of the Soviet system were instantly transformed. Various «historical» versions were widely circulated: they began to rethink and reinterpret the ethnic history of the Caucasian peoples; when studying historical topics in Ossetian historiography, often conflicting conclusions were put forward, which in turn allowed the interested party to choose from the provided diverse and completely eclectic data a version that was beneficial for themselves and use it for the necessary argumentation to resolve controversial issues on the history of Ossetia. Key issues in the history of Georgian-Ossetian relations are a clear example of this: Ossetian historians are usually prone to artificial „obsolescence” of their history in the South Caucasus; they asserted that Ossetians are autochthonous in several regions of northern Georgia, and Georgians had never lived in these places. Since written sources did not allow to substantiate such a version in any way, they attempted to expand the chronological limits of their residence in the South Caucasus on the basis of material culture, in particular, archaeological material, again

through artificial “obsolescence” of their settling in the South Caucasus. Since the end of the last century, there has been an active process of creating new mythologems by Ossetian scholars.

In 1990-1992, Georgia was first involved in hostilities in the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region, and then, in 1992-1993, in Abkhazia.² After the 1990-1992 conflict, the fragile but somewhat peaceful period between Georgia and the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region (hereinafter SOAR) was marked by the restoration of economic and social ties and a certain normalization of relations.³ However, after the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, these ties were interrupted.

Multifaceted communication between Georgians and Ossetians before the war always determined the character of their relations and attitudes. The historical experience of their confrontation or support for each other has been reflected in the ambivalent stereotypes of Georgians and Ossetians. If, on the one hand, positive stereotypes laid the foundation for positive relations between them, on the other hand, negative stereotypes strengthened the ground for their confrontation. Accentuation of the negative stereotypes served as an instrument of manipulation for certain political forces. Russia, through its flexible propaganda policy and practical actions, widened the gap between the Georgians and Ossetians. However, despite the Georgian-Ossetian armed conflict of the 1990s and its dire consequences (ethnic cleansing, expulsion, migration), the roots of traditional relations were strong enough to maintain personal ties between Georgians and Ossetians, and for a reconciliation trend to exist. This was facilitated by the fact that Georgian population of the region remained on the spot and played the role of an intermediary in the normalization of Georgian-Ossetian relations. The August 2008 war has radically changed the relations between these two peoples.

During the August war about forty Georgian villages were burned and completely destroyed. Up to 130,000 people, mostly ethnic Georgians, were evicted from their homes and subjected to ethnic cleansing; 26,000 of them, the residents of the former SOAR and adjacent territories, are still in expulsion.⁴

² N. Loladze, *Migratory Movements of Georgia's Greek Community*. Berlin: Peter Lang Verlag, 2021, p. 52.

³ L. Janiashvili (ed.), *Rusuli saok'up'atsio p'olit'ik'a da kartul-osuri urtiertobebi shida kartlisi* (Russian Occupation Policy and Georgian-Ossetian Relations in Shida Kartli), *Kronosi 1*, Tbilisi 2020, pp. 122-129.

⁴ Sakartvelos mtavroba, shida kartlis sakhelmts'ipo rts'munebulis administ'ratsia (Government of

Before the August War, Georgian government controlled 103 settlements in the former SOAR, that is, in the gorges of Didi and Patara Lia-khvi, as well as in various gorges adjacent to Tskhinvali region and in Akhlagori district. After the declaration of independence by the separatist region (August 2008), these villages ended up in the annexed territory.

Since 2009, the de facto government of the occupied region has begun to define and mark the “state border” through constructing a new border infrastructure in the occupied territories.⁵ In April 2010, a *Law on the State Border*⁶ was adopted in Tskhinvali, on the basis of which from 2011 the Ossetian side with the assistance of the border guards of Russian Federal Security Service (ФСБ), has actively continued the fragmentary process of borderization. As a result, the occupation line enclosed another 32 villages, and in total, the Georgian side lost control over 135 settlements.

The total area of the occupied territories is 3.8 thousand km², and total length of the occupation line in this direction is over 350 km; near the occupied village of Orchosani the de-facto border is about half a kilometer closer to Georgia’s East-West highway and the Kartli-2 power line; a 1.5-kilometre underground section of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline has been brought under South Ossetian control.⁷ Intense borderization led to the division of 34 settlements, where houses and agricultural lands ended up on opposite sides of the dividing line.⁸

According to the EUMM, the physical borderization includes: “more than 60 km of security fences, 20 km of surveillance equipment, over 200 ‘Republic of South Ossetia border’ signs, 19 Russian border guard bases and four controlled crossing points.”⁹ It is noteworthy, that the number of surveillance cameras and sign boards erected on the occupation line has increased since then, however, there is no official data on the exact number today.

Georgia, Shida Kartli State Representative-Governor’s office), <http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gwdict/index.php?a=term&d=6&t=4166>.

⁵ *Transparency International Beyond Barbed Wire: Violation of Human Rights in Georgia due to Borderization*, 2009, pp. 5-7.

⁶ Закон РЮО о государственной границе. Available at: <http://cominf.org/node/1166483785>

⁷ E. E l b a k i d z e, *Rusuli mtsotsavi ok’up’atsia tsiprebshi* (Russian Creeping Occupation in Numbers), <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/30489-rusuli-mtsotsavi-okupatsia-tsiprebshi>; M. E d w a r d s, *South Ossetia’s creeping border*, 20 July 2015. Available from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/south-ossetias-creeping-border/>.

⁸ Amnesty International, *Behind Barbed Wire: Human Rights Toll of Borderization*, 2019, p. 6.

⁹ European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, *Situation at the Administrative Boundary Line with South Ossetia* 2019. Available at: https://eumm.eu/en/press_and_public_information/press_releases/36637/?year=2019&month=9;

The official positions of Georgia and most of the international community regarding the 2008 war and the current borderization along the line of occupation differ significantly from the point of view of Russia and, accordingly, de facto South Ossetia: Georgia and the international community refer to this process as “creeping occupation” or “borderization”, but official Russia and de facto South Ossetia, regard it as a transformation of the administrative border into a strictly militarized international border.¹⁰

As a result of borderization, Georgians, as well as Ossetians living on both sides of the dividing line cannot move freely; some people do not have access to agricultural land – a source of vital agricultural activity, pastures, drinking and irrigation water; due to the demarcation line, a total of 800-1000 families have lost full or partial access to agricultural lands and forests by various criteria. People can no longer go to cemeteries and places of worship, Georgian citizens remaining in Ossetian/Russian-controlled territory cannot receive primary health care and education in their mother tongue, they cannot visit families and friends; they often have limited possibility to provide firewood for winter and trade agricultural products.

Initially the perimeter of the dividing line was not completely defined or marked, consequently, the locals could not understand where the occupation line passed and conducted their activities in prohibited areas (gathering firewood, berries or chestnuts, grazing livestock, agricultural work etc.). In addition, residents crossed the restricted areas to trade, visit relatives, receive medical and social assistance, visit cemeteries, or attend religious holidays; therefore Russian and Ossetian border guards often detained them for „illegal violation of the border.” Although today the „Security fences” are installed almost everywhere, the situation has not changed to this day. People on both sides of the occupation line, risking their own safety, still try to cross the “border” for their social, economic, cultural or moral benefits and interests; they are still being arrested, that in some cases can even be regarded as kidnapping. This situation creates constant psychological pressure on the locals and enhances the feeling of living in an unstable environment. As a result, most of the ethnic Geor-

¹⁰ P. Zakareishvili, *Khedva – k'onplikt'ebi sakartveloshi 2012-2016*, (Vision - Conflicts in Georgia 2012-2016), *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, Tbilisi 2021; N. Jalabidze, *Mtsotsavi ok'up'atsia shida kartlisi da mastan dak'avshirebuli p'roblemebi* (Creeping Annexation in Shida Kartli and the Related problems), *Caucasian Ethnological Collection XX*, (2020), pp. 195-212; E. Boyle, *Borderization in Georgia: Sovereignty Materialized*, *Eurasia Border Review* 7 (1), 2016, pp. 1-18.

gian families who remained in the Tskhinvali-controlled part eventually fled their homes and moved to Georgian-controlled side. Paradoxical as it may seem, but the fences are in some cases, ostensibly for clarity, perceived as creating a sense of security.

With a high probability, the Russian occupation regime cannot fully control the movement through the dividing line, however, the number of people abducted and detained by border guards is still a matter of serious concern. According to official data, from 2008 to the end of 2021, 1,420 people from villages adjacent to the zone of occupation were detained for illegally crossing the “border”.¹¹

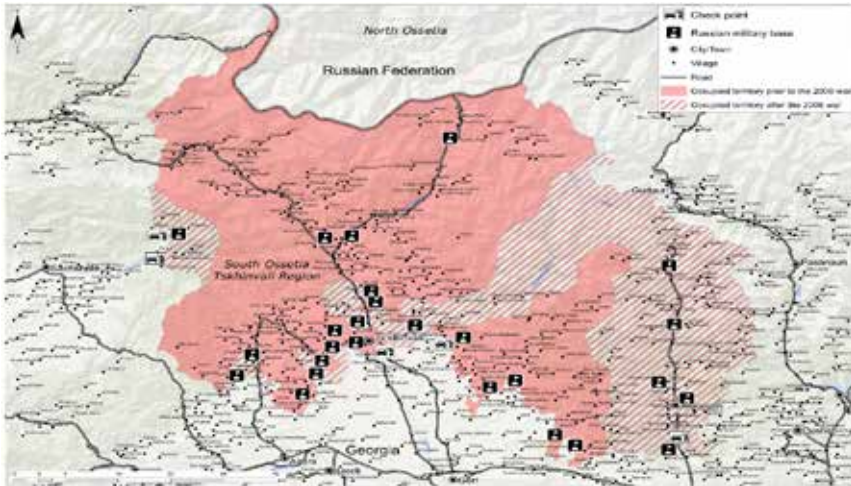
Until the autumn of 2019, by the Russian authorities and representatives of de facto South Ossetia it was allowed to cross the demarcation line with special documents (the so-called pass/propusk) at 5 border checkpoints: Ergneti, Zardiaantkari, Odzisi-Mosabruni (Razdakhan), Kardzmani and Sinaguri; Odzisi- Mosabruni crossing point was used exclusively by the Akhagori inhabitants, Kardzmani and Sinaguri were used by residents of some villages in Imereti, in particular, in the Sachkhere municipality; Through the Ergneti checkpoint mainly patients were transported to Tbilisi for medical assistance. Russian and de facto South Ossetian forces deny entry into Akhagori or the rest of the occupied region to ethnic Georgians who lived in former SOAR or Akhagori area prior to the 2008 armed conflict.¹² However, from time to time, under various pretexts, the occupation forces close the crossing points (see map 2).

The situation became especially aggravated in August 2019 in connection with the events in the village of Chorchana (Khashuri municipality), when the Georgian government constructed a police post on the territory which is under the control of the central Georgian government; the Ossetian side protested that this post was installed without their consent, and decided to close the Odzisi-Mosabruni checkpoint in response.

The tension over the incident in the village of Chorchana indicates that, despite the occupation of the former SOAR by Russia and the recognition of its independence, the territorial claims of the occupation regime have not yet been satisfied, and the demarcation-borderization process is being used to escalate the conflict. The situation became especially tense

¹¹ *Statement of the State Security Service of Georgia*. Available at: <https://ssg.gov.ge/news/656/saxelmtsifo-usafirtxoebis-samsaxuris-2021ganxadeba>; *Radio Liberty*, Borderization and the arrests along the occupation line-2021. Available at: <https://shorturl.at/koBK6>.

¹² *Amnesty International, Behind Barbed Wire: Human Rights Toll of Borderization*, 2019, p. 24.



Map 2. Former South Ossetian Autonomous Region before and after the 2008 war (compiled by Nika Loladze).

after Covid-19 was declared a pandemic in March 2020; by a unilateral decision of the occupation regime, all checkpoints were closed.

According to the periodical publication of the EU Mission in Georgia: „The southern part of the administrative border of South Ossetia crosses the most fertile and densely populated agricultural lands of Central Georgia. With this abundance of people, farms, livestock and land, the administrative border line is a constant challenge for conflict-affected population on both sides. It hinders freedom of movement; restricts efficient cultivation of agricultural lands and separates friends and families”.¹³

Along with a complex daily and political reality, this situation, raises important questions from the standpoint of anthropological and Border studies: what is the significance of the dividing line for the local population living near to it and what role does it play in the dynamics of Georgian-Ossetian traditional relations?

After 2008, former administrative border of South Ossetia, which was only a dotted line on the map, transformed into a strictly militarized physical barrier. This process unambiguously corresponds to the transformation of “thin” border into a locked international border similar to the

¹³ The European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia. Monitor “Ten Years of Continuous Presence in Georgia.” *A Bulletin from the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia* 7, 2018. Available at: https://eumm.eu/data/file/6486/The_EUMM_Monitor_issue_7_ENG.pdf

“big” Iron Curtain. As a result, intensive borderization is an insurmountable barrier for local population, which will lead to the longest rupture of sociocultural ties in the history of the conflict.

Since 2008, the post-war policy of Russia towards the occupied territories of Georgia and their population clearly shows that, despite the change of time, it has not changed. The similar situation can be traced in the Ukraine, regarding the recognition of the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk People’s Republic in Donbas as independent states by Russia. The current events in de facto South Ossetia are part of Russia’s expansionist plan towards Georgia, according to which the empire is trying step by step to integrate South Ossetia into the RF and regain control over the South Caucasus. Russia’s expansion into de facto South Ossetia takes place in many directions; these directions are so intertwined and interdependent that they create a unified system where the activation of one of them activates the others.

With the help of the border guards of the Federal Security Service of Russia (FSB), the Ossetian side is demarcating and expanding borders (borderization); Russia militarizes the occupied territories, establishes new military frontier bases, annually increases the military contingent and strengthens their combat weapons; often the occupation regime arrests the so-called “violators of the “border”, hence, the life of illegally detained people is violated; in a number of cases, military trainings are intensively held; demonstration of military force morally destroys the population of the villages on the Georgia-controlled side and exposes them to constant stress; the bases are staffed by Russian military personnel, who live here with their families, and their number is growing accordingly. There function Russian kindergartens and schools for their children, where the service staff is Russian-speaking; most of the Georgian schools were abolished, and the rest are gradually being transferred to Russian-language institutions; a church was built for the Russian diaspora, subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church; the population of the region is economically dependent on the Russian market; the Roki checkpoint was abolished; due to the absence of connection with the rest of Georgia, the only way for the population of de facto South Ossetia to communicate with the rest of the world is through North; local Ossetian and Russian-language schools teach falsified history, which presents former South Ossetian Autonomous Region as historical Ossetia, and the Georgians as their enemies; Russia supports and paves the way for the youth in the occupied region to pursue higher education in Russia; the population of

the occupied region is intensively granted Russian citizenship, hence they benefit Russian pension, etc. According to experts, these circumstances have turned the entire occupied region into a political entity completely dependent on Russia.

The issue of religion became the object of manipulation by the occupation regime. During the war, most of the churches and monasteries in the former SOAR were destroyed; the war had a devastating effect on the spiritual life and religious practice of the people who remained in the occupied territories, refugees and those affected by the borderization. The once monolithic and religiously integrated society faces disintegration. The affected population has lost access to its shrines and can no longer celebrate religious holidays, the prospect of oblivion threatens joint folk celebrations and common religious practices.

The Ossetians declared Georgian cultural monuments to be Ossetian; some of the churches were repainted and some were destroyed. According to widespread information, Ossetians removed stones with Georgian inscriptions and images of Orthodox crosses from church walls.¹⁴

Due to the borderization, some historical temples of great spiritual significance for the local population ended up behind barbed wire; according to the established tradition, both Georgians and Ossetians regularly gathered in these places during religious holidays. Currently, the population remaining on the Georgian-controlled side is denied access to at least nine Georgian Orthodox churches. People can no longer visit the graves of their ancestors or shrines, they cannot celebrate church holidays. In the future, there is a danger that joint folk holidays and common religious rites will be forgotten. The right of local residents to freedom of religion and participation in cultural life is being violated, which is likely to lead to their alienation and finally destroy this traditional form of intercultural communication.

Russia's expansionist policy in the occupied territory is manifested primarily in the measures taken in relation to the education system; The occupation regime restricts ethnic Georgians living in the occupied territories from receiving education in their native language, abolishes Georgian schools, extremely reduces classes in the Georgian language and literature, Georgian-speaking students and teachers in schools are forbid-

¹⁴ N. J a l a b a d z e, "2008 ts'els tskhinvalis regionidan devnili mosakhleobis q'opis zogierti asp'ekt'i etnografiuli monatsemebis mikhedvit'" (Some aspects of the displaced population from the Tskhinvali region in 2008 (According to ethnographic data), *Kavkasiis etnologiuri krebuli* XV, Tbilisi 2008.

den to speak their native language, and applicants are forbidden to enter universities located on territory controlled by the Georgian state, etc.

The Government of Georgia cares a lot about the medical and social protection of the borderization-affected population. Recently, the status of a high-mountain settlement was assigned to settlements adjacent to the occupation line and located at an altitude of at least 800 meters above sea level (19 settlements). For this category of the population pensions have been increased, various tax exemptions were granted to them. Medical stations were opened in the villages. The measures taken are aimed at improving their economic and social situation.

To the citizens of Georgia living in the occupied territories and having the opportunity to cross the occupation line the state provides a full package of free medical care in any medical institution in Georgia and the opportunity to join the system of social protection and benefits of Georgia; various medical programs are also available to them¹⁵.

Unfortunately, in recent times, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic, occupation regime has isolated “its citizens” and refused medical assistance offered by the Georgian government; in some cases, such a refusal had disastrous consequences. The ban on the free movement of residents from the occupied region violates their fundamental human rights. The Tskhinvali regime creates artificial barriers for the activities of the Georgian health authorities; Misinformation propaganda messages against Georgia, association of Georgia with the threat acquired a systematic and targeted form on information platforms.¹⁶

After the August 2008 war, Russian military machine tightly controls the zone of occupation, restricts the movement of the population and, consequently, drastically changes the vector of historically established economic and cultural communications. Due to the occupation line, Georgian-Ossetian economic and socio-cultural ties, have almost ceased. A large part of the population in this region has left the places of residence and moved to Russian Federation or specially constructed settlements in Shida Kartli. The villages are almost completely empty, the ties established over centuries have been severed, traditional branches of economy have been deranged, the sources of income for many families have chan-

¹⁵ Sakartvelos sak'anonmdeblo matsne (Legislative Bulletin of Georgia) 2010.

¹⁶ M. B o k u c h a v a, “P'andemia ok'up'atsiis p'irobebshi apkhazetis da tskhinvalis regionis sainpormatsio p'lat'porme bis gzavnilebi” (Pandemic under conditions of occupation, messages of information platforms from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region) pp. 40-41, 44-45 <http://gcsd.org.ge>

ged; this creates a systemic problem threatening the integrity of social, economic and political structure of the state.

The new reality associated with the borderization of the occupation line has caused daily danger, alienation and isolation of the population on both sides. Relations between Georgians and Ossetians have changed significantly. In their attitude towards each other, two positions –tolerance and xenophobia are clearly traced. The current situation stimulates migration, which is likely to lead to the depopulation of villages. It is clear that the situation after 2008 will cause irreversible damage to Georgian-Ossetian relations and probably exclude the possibility of starting any constructive process. On both sides of the dividing line, generations alienated from each other are growing up.

Therefore, it is important to constantly study the academic and analytical issues related to the process of borderization, and take concrete practical measures, based primarily on the daily experience of the local population.

Georgian – Ossetian Relations in the context of Russian occupation

As a result of the borderization of the dividing line by the occupation regime in the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region, 135 settlements ended up on the territory controlled by Russia; 34 villages under Georgia's jurisdiction were divided and a single community was split into two parts. Both Georgian and Ossetian populations on both sides of the occupation "border" cannot cross freely the occupation line, and their private and public property has become inaccessible to most of them. The occupation policy of Russia has led to the disruption of traditional ethno-cultural and economic ties between Georgians and Ossetians, their isolation and alienation. The current situation is causing irreversible damage to Georgian-Ossetian relations and is likely to lead to the transformation of the ethnic and state identity of the population living in the Russian-controlled part. The consequences of borderization minimize the possibility of initiating any constructive process at this stage.

Keywords: Russian occupation, Georgian-Ossetian relations, borderization.

